

HEROIN'S COMEBACK

By Bill Stanczykiewicz

The recent death of “Glee” actor Cory Monteith from an overdose of alcohol and heroin has opened some eyes to a stark reality— heroin, a pop culture star in the 1970s, is back for an unwelcomed encore.

Heroin’s new popularity isn’t just a fad in the entertainment world, either, and the home medicine cabinet often is the gateway. The Indiana Prevention Resource Center (IPRC) reports, 2.1 percent of Hoosier high school seniors have ever used heroin, 50 percent higher than the national average.

While the percentage of heroin use seems small, the recent increase is not. Tippecanoe County Prosecutor Pat Harrington said heroin cases have risen 600 percent in the last five years, and the trend is affecting law enforcement.

“There are police officers who have been on the department for a number of years, and they’ve actually had to go through drug education recognition classes because heroin was nonexistent,” Harrington explained. “Heroin now is so cheap and is so readily available.”

Harrington said teens often meet drug dealers through someone they know. Natalie (not her real name), is a recovering addict. She agreed that access to drugs in school is easy, but she got her start in the family medicine cabinet.

“I did prescription drugs for a long time before I started doing heroin,” Natalie admitted. “I never thought I would do heroin ever, but I was taking way too many pills, and it became way too expensive. Going from prescription pills to heroin, its way cheaper.”

According to IPRC, Indiana has the nation’s second highest rate of high school students abusing prescription drugs – 21 percent. The top source of those drugs: buying pills from a friend. “They’re everywhere,” Natalie asserted. “The drug kids at school. Adults who don’t want the pills anymore. Folks selling unused prescription drugs.”

Cierra (last name withheld) said her brother Jesse started smoking marijuana, which led to prescription pills, then heroin, and finally, his death. “My brother told me you’re always chasing your first high,” Cierra related. “Your first high is the best high you’re ever going to have, and that’s why you continue to do harder and harder drugs. That’s why kids progress from marijuana, to pills, to heroin because they’re looking for a better high.”

Cierra said an addict moving from one drug to the next is never satisfied. “Ever. That’s what is so addictive about it.”

Cierra saw that relentless cycle stop her brother’s life. Natalie, meanwhile, simply decided to stop. She confessed to her mom and checked into rehab.

“I was sick of feeling filthy,” Natalie lamented. “You feel disgusting to your core. I was sick of being sick. I am sick of chasing that high every single day. I was sick of everything I had to do just to get it. Stealing and lying. Cheating my way through life. And it’s something that I never want to do again.”

And something parents never want their kids to do in the first place. While prevention efforts offer no guarantees, IPRC recommends that parents, educators and youth workers maintain open communication with children and teens – communication about what they hear from friends and see in the community as well as communication about temptations they might face to take drugs.

Parents can help prevent prescription drug abuse by continually counting the legally prescribed pills at home and then keeping the medicine bottle out of reach, even hidden. Caring adults also can watch for warning signs of drug abuse including depression, a lack of motivation, constant lying about friends and whereabouts, severe weight loss and frequent tiredness and sleeping.

Natalie is clean again after a brief relapse with prescription drugs. She and her mom, Jennifer, speak to anyone who will listen, including community groups, hoping their emotional story will move kids to avoid drugs. In her own effort to stay clean, Natalie moved away from home to avoid the temptations of her drug-using friends. Jennifer cautions parents to be on the lookout for drug use, even among kids, like hers, that they might least suspect.

Harrington added, “Youth today face this on a daily basis, this temptation to use drugs. Heroin doesn’t care about your race or your religious preference or your position in life. It’s across the spectrum.”

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